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# LOCKE ON PERSONAL IDENTITY

*(Part 1 of 2)*

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Text source:

*Essay Concerning Human  
Understanding, bk. 2 ch. 27*

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# INTRODUCING IDENTITY

- As we have seen, we think of the world as populated by **properties** (a.k.a. qualities) and the **things that have properties**.
  - Moreover, we think of many of the things we encounter as relatively **stable, enduring things**.
    - Many of things we encounter endure through time.
    - We can encounter something and re-encounter it later on.
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# QUESTIONS THAT ARISE IN THINKING ABOUT IDENTITY

- What *makes* something ‘one and the same thing’, enduring through time?
  - Can we state the conditions for a given thing A (at one time) to be one and the same thing as a given thing B (at a later time)?
  - What about *synchronous* identity (identity at a given moment)?
  - These 3 questions all ask us to provide a ‘**principle of individuation**’: a rule or criterion for determining questions of identity.
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## HERE OUR CONCERN IS WITH NUMERICAL IDENTITY, NOT QUALITATIVE IDENTITY

- Don't confuse questions of *numerical identity* with questions of *qualitative identity*.
    - **Numerical identity:** where we have *one and the same thing*.
    - **Qualitative identity:** where we have *two or more qualitatively indistinguishable things*, like perfect twins.
  - Note that you can have numerical ID without qualitative ID, and vice versa. They are completely different.
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# PERSONAL IDENTITY: THE ISSUE

- Locke is particularly interested in the particular problem of identity of *persons* across time, since...
  - 📞 We need to understand what personal identity consists in to properly understand what exactly a person *is*.
  - 📞 We need an account of this sort of identity to evaluate questions of *moral responsibility* and *just reward and punishment*.
  - 📞 We need an account of this sort of identity to assess claims about *an afterlife beyond bodily death, resurrection, reincarnation, body-swapping thought experiments* etc.
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# LOCKE ON IDENTITY IN GENERAL

- Locke says it makes no sense to bluntly ask the question “Is X the same as Y?” This is not a well-formed question.
  - Instead we must ask “Is X the same **F** as Y?”, where **F** picks out a **sortal**: a general concept that picks out *the type or sort of thing we’re talking about*.
    - E.g. “Is X the same *lump of matter* as Y?”
    - “Is X the same *horse* as Y?”
    - “Is X the same *car* as Y?”
    - “Is X the same *person* as Y?”
  - Depending on which sortal category you deploy, you may well get a different answer. The principle of individuation may well be different for different sortal categories.
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# LOCKE ON PERSONAL IDENTITY

- What then does Locke mean by the sortal concept '**person**'?
    - First, note that he distinguishes '*man*' (= the organism or functioning body) from '*person*' (which he also sometimes calls '*self*'). (ECHU 2.27.6, 2.27.21, 2.27.17)
    - For Locke, '*person*' specifies an intelligent, thinking being that is conscious of itself as itself across time (2.27.9, 2.27.17).
    - It is bound up with a first-person point of view or awareness (a '*consciousness*'). Locke says what you are right now (*qua person*) is a certain stretch of self-aware consciousness, made up of thoughts, sensations, emotions, memories, intentions etc...
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## “WHAT PERSON STANDS FOR”

- “[T]o find wherein personal identity consists, we must consider what **person** stands for;--which, I think, is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it” (ECHU 2.27.9)
  - “Self is that conscious thinking thing,--whatever substances made up of, (whether spiritual or material, simple or compounded, it matters not)—which is sensible of conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and is so far concerned for itself, as far as that consciousness extends” (ECHU 2.27.17)
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## “PERSON IS A FORENSIC TERM”

- ❑ So for Locke, ‘person’ specifies an intelligent, thinking being that is conscious of itself as itself across time (2.27.9, 2.27.17).
  - ❑ It is tied up with *expectations* (what should you hope for, anticipate, fear) and *memories*. (2.27.9, 2.27.17)
  - ❑ It is also tied up with *moral responsibility* (what acts you should feel shame, remorse, or pride for) and *just punishments and rewards* (what acts you should be justly be rewarded or punished for). (2.27.18, 2.27.26)
  - As Locke puts it, “*person is a forensic term [i.e. having to do with courts of law] appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs only intelligent agents capable of law, and happiness and misery.*” (2.27.26)
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## LOCKE'S CRITERION OF PERSONAL IDENTITY: CONTINUITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

- With persons (“Is X the same person as Y?”), Locke says that what is required is continuity of consciousness. (ECHU 2.27.9-10, 2.27.16, 2.27.17, 2.27.23)
  - What you are (qua person) in the course of your life is a series of stretches of consciousness, connected through memory.
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## LOCKE: “CONSCIOUSNESS MAKES PERSONAL IDENTITY”

- “[S]ince consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes everyone to be that which he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being; and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then.” (ECHU 2.27.9)
  - “[I]t being the same consciousness that personal identity depends on that only ... For as far as any intelligent being *can* repeat the idea of any past action with the same consciousness it had of it at first, and with the same consciousness it has of any present action; so far it is the same personal self.” (ECHU 2.27.10)
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